THE SEPARATOR

By Gerald Kobriger

Craig Bihrle

I knew right away it was going to be one of those days. The ringing telephone in a dream gradually transforms into the alarm, as I fumble for the sleep button simply because it's easier to find than the off button. My glasses tumble to the floor, and the coffee cup nearly follows, before I hit the right button.

It's awful dark – 4 a.m. according to the clock. Let's see. Why is the alarm going off so early? Right. It's a Monday and I'm still doing brood surveys. How's the weather? I lift the curtain only a foot or so from bed and check outside. The leaves aren't moving, that's good, no wind. A faint glow in the east indicates an hour or so until sunrise and the sky seems clear. Guess it's a go.

From July 15 through August, brood surveys are the order of the morning for some North Dakota Game and Fish Department personnel. Routes start at sunrise, so the alarm has to be set early to allow travel to the starting point, sometimes found an hour from home. As I throw the blankets back I catch the sound of Mr. Coffee in the kitchen starting his morning chore. Thank you Joe DiMaggio. The brew time feature allows another five or 10 minutes in the sack in the morning. Plus, the smell of coffee serves as an incentive. It's easier to get up if a hot cup is waiting.

Over the years, I have reduced the time from when I hit the alarm button to opening the pickup door to about eight minutes. That includes dressing, making toast, grabbing a banana, filling cup and thermos, and walking out to the street. I down the toast after leaving home, usually finishing as I pass the city limits. The eating is the easy part. To get the toast out to the pickup, I have to balance it on my coffee cup. Do you know how much grit a dry piece of toast can pick up from the sidewalk or street? Not as much if it lands butter side down, as I've tried both.

This morning, conditions seem pretty good. Best conditions for brood surveys are clear, calm mornings with heavy dew. This is called a "prime" morning, so termed by an early mentor, Carl Trautman, retired game biologist with the South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks, with whom I ran my first brood route in 1958 in Brookings County. In southwest North Dakota, however, prime mornings are as scarce as balanced government budgets.

In the semiarid mid- to short-grass prairie areas, dew seldom exists. Carl used to wear hip boots on prime mornings, while I have to sweep my hand through the vegetation in the road ditch and still spit on my fingers to find any moisture. When the morning is not prime, that means it is dry with maybe a little breeze. You really have to sharpen your eyeballs to find broods of any species under those conditions. We concentrate on pheasants, sharp-tailed grouse, Hungarian partridge and wild turkeys. Federal wildlife managers want us to count doves, too, so we mark them down as well as the occasional rabbit and squirrel.

Things are really slow this morning, literally, as I'm expected not to exceed 15 miles per hour on these routes. All the wildlife seems to be sleeping, except for a couple of pheasant roosters spotted on the road still claiming territories and hoping for a little action, and a pair of gray partridge – or Hungarian partridge as many people call them – scurrying down a fence line. Not to worry, there is always something around the separator.

The separator? Now where did that come from? What I was thinking about was an old thrashing machine up the road a couple miles that is surrounded by a small idle plot of ground that's always good for a brood or two. But separator? I thought back to find the roots for that term, and really had to dig deep. Somehow, it popped up through 40 some years of memory layers. I finally recalled early years on my uncle's farm south of Huron, South Dakota, my hometown. When I was young, I spent portions of many summers on his land getting in the way, mostly, before eventually working up to those highly coveted jobs like picking rock and fixing fence. You could probably include hauling alfalfa bales filled with sandburs to that list. To be honest, I think I liked mowing the best, using an old H Farmall. I have a Franklin Mint Precision Model sitting on my desk today that occasionally encourages me to drift back to those days on the farm.

I remember my uncle Leo referring to a thrashing machine, stored in the alley of one of the granaries, as a separator. Why? I never asked. Perhaps they were indeed called that because they did separate grain from chaff back in the days of binders, huge straw piles, and prairie chickens.

If you're young, I remember, you don't go playing in those straw piles, regardless of the amount of fun you have sliding down and burrowing in. That's where the flying pigs live, you know, and they are death to adventuresome youngsters. That scary story was told to me by my older cousin, Faye, who was occasionally saddled with looking after me. And, maybe, a straw stack did hold some danger.

There are a lot of separators remaining around the country, and most seem to be growing out of hilltops. Why hilltops have become the chosen cemeteries for these machines is unknown to me. But as you travel the byways, you can't help but notice these old machines slowly succumbing to the passing of time.

Well, my separator failed me this day. I broke the code and walked around the machine looking for broods, even though you're not supposed to leave your vehicle unless you see a brood and are trying to flush all the young to get an accurate count. But I wanted to stretch my legs and reminisce a little. The separator was quite a distance from any farm site and I wondered about its history. I can still picture the thrashing scenes, the old W-9 or similar tractor, the long drive belt, and crews pitching bundles.

I walked back to my pickup, slammed the door and watched as a covey of 17 gray partridge flushed and disappeared behind a single-row tree belt, banking to the left at the last instant. Well, that's OK. The separator still holds its magic, and I enjoyed the trip back in time. If it had been a prime morning, the partridge would have been out on the road or in the open where and I would have seen them. Satisfied, I continued on to the end of my route.

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The Separator, a sometimes honey hole for upland game birds and a sign of times gone by, sits idle in southwest North Dakota. The state's prairie landscape is dotted with these farming relics.

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